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ABSTRACT

A study compared two groups of children attending two urban elementary schools who were unready for first grade at the conclusion of kindergarten. One group of 23 students was retained in kindergarten while the other group of 117 was promoted to the first grade. The California Test of Basic Skills was used to measure the reading ability of both groups at the end of first grade. Results indicated no significant difference between the two groups. Findings suggest that retention in kindergarten does not benefit the reading achievement of first-grade students. (One table of data is included; 36 references and two appendixes of comparative score data are attached.) (RS)

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The Effect of Retention on Kindergarten Children

by
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Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Master of Arts Degree

Kean College of New Jersey
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Abstract

This study compared two groups of children that were unready for first grade at the conclusion of kindergarten. One group was retained in kindergarten (N=23) while the other group (N=117) was promoted to first grade. The California Test of Basic Skills was used to measure the reading ability of both groups at the end of first grade. There was no significant difference between the two groups in this study. An historical perspective of retention is given. Also, research studies reporting the effects of retention on self concept and the drop out rate are discussed.

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Retention - is it a reasonable solution to better prepare kindergarten students for education in our school systems? Many factors including early entrance age, immaturity, and escalating kindergarten curriculum have been blamed for the child's lack of success in kindergarten. Many solutions have been offered to cure this problem; transitional classes, pre-entrance testing, raising the entrance age and retention are among them.

Trends of retaining and promoting children in the primary grades have fluctuated in past years. Advocates view retention as a way for the school to respond to the differences in background, developmental stages and aptitude of the students. It is believed that an additional year in the primary grades will give the immature or unready student time to mature and become ready for instruction. Thus preventing failure before it occurs (Shepard & Smith, 1989). Goodlad (1954) found less damage to a child's social relations with peers among first grade retainees than those retained in later years.

Kindergarten retention can be traumatic and disruptive for children. After interviewing parents, Shepard and Smith (1989) found that "most parents reported significant negative emotional effects associated with retention."This can initiate a negative attitude regarding school and the child's ability to learn. Children who are old for their grade are much more likely than their classmates to drop out

of school (Hill, 1989). A research study done in Chicago by William Rice (1989) indicates an association of reading skills, retention and drop-outs. According to Rice, the drop-out syndrome begins very early in a children's education.

Shepard and Smith's study (1987) on the effects of kindergarten retention at the end of first grade indicates no differences were found between the retained and promoted groups in reading achievement, math achievement, social maturity, learner self-concept or attention. Lucille Niklason (1987) continued one step further to discover if certain groups of children could profit from a grade retention. Her findings indicate "that promoted children made more progress the following year than those who have been retained." Retention did not benefit younger children, children receiving supplementary instruction or children with average or above intelligence. They conclude that additional research with varied populations is necessary to attempt to provide the basis for educational policy.

Hypothesis

To provide additional information in this area, the following study was undertaken. It was hypothesized that retaining children in the primary grades does not benefit the slow reader as measured by the California Test of Basic Skills Reading Test.

Definitions

transitional class - an additional school year following kindergarten but preceding first grade. Its purpose is to give the child additional time to mature and better prepare themselves for first grade.

Procedures

Two elementary schools in an urban school district were utilized for this study. The subjects used in this study were included using the following criteria: (a) they scored at the 45th percentile or below on the Metropolitan Readiness Test II, Form P in kindergarten and, (b) they had taken the California Test of Basic Skills at the end of first grade.
This information was obtained from the students' cumulative file.

Using the above criteria, 117 students were identified for inclusion in this study. Of those 117 students, 94 that scored in the 45th percentile or below had been promoted to the next grade while 23 children who fit the above criteria had been retained in kindergarten. The promoted and retained samples were compared at the end of the first grade using the reading scores on the California Test of Basic Skills. These scores were analyzed using a measure of t to determine

the difference between the mean achievement in reading of the two samples.

Results

As can be seen in Table 1 the retained samples mean

Table 1

Mean, Standard Deviation and t between Reading Achievement of Retained and Promoted Samples

Subjects	Mean	Standard Deviation	t
retained	54.74	23.56	.46
promoted	57.10	21.72	
DF 115	NS		

score was 54.74 compared to the promoted samples mean score of 57.10. While the promoted sample scored 2.36 points higher on the California Test of Basic Skills than the retained sample, this difference is not considered significant as shown by the t of .46.

Children who remained in kindergarten an additional year did not achieve more than the promoted sample according to their reading score on the California Test of Basic Skills.

Conclusions & Implications

This study indicates that retention in kindergarten does not appear to benefit the reading achievement of first grade students. In certain cases, individual children who were retained showed growth in their reading achievement in contrast to the small gain in the mean score of the retained sample. Possibly, these students share certain characteristics that make retention beneficial. Before educational policies are formulated regarding retention, additional research is needed to discover if retention should be based on other measures than reading percentiles.

The hypothesis has been supported by the results of this study. The implication is that a solution other then retention needs to be implemented to provide a necessary education to all of our students.

The Effect of Retention on Kindergarten Children:
Related Research

Flunking, repeating, nonpromotion, retention, or a "year to grow" - according to William Bock (1977) they all mean the same thing. Trends of retaining and promoting unready students in the primary grades have fluctuated in past years. In a historical perspective, grade retention became the method of correcting academic differences following the introduction of graded classes in the early 19th century (Cunningham & Owens, 1976). Previous to this time, children progressed at their own rate with their status being determined by texts completed. During the 1930's, retention was challenged by social scientists who feared damage to the child's social and emotional growth. From the 1930's to the 1960's, an era of social promotion existed, where children were passed on to the next grade and provided with remedial help if needed. As we progressed into the 1970's, many critics viewed social promotions as the reason for declining achievement scores and called for stricter promotion standards (Rose, Medway, Cantrell & Marus, 1983). A Gallup Poll survey (1986) reported that 72% of the people favored stricter grade to grade promotion standards. In the 1980's, policies that require minimal competencies for promotion or graduation had been established. This was to ensure that students would possess necessary academic skills, but often it increased the rate of retention (Holmes, 1983).

The decision to retain students is usually for either academic difficulties and/or immaturity (Butler & Handley,

1990). Retention of students because of immaturity was demonstrated to be a more positive decision for retaining students (Hall & Wallace, 1986). It is assumed that by giving students an extra year to mature and/or gain the academic skills necessary, they will be better prepared to progress to the next grade level. According to Shepard & Smith (1989), it is estimated that 6% of students are retained. This produces a cumulative rate of nonpromotion at approximately 50%. Males, minorities and low socioeconomic status children are more likely to be retained (Rose, Medway, Cantrell & Marus, 1983).

Numerous studies have been conducted to examine the effects of grade retention on student achievement. Jackson (1975) reviewed available studies and cautions us to beware of the reliability of research with methodological flaws. He concluded that "there is no reliable body of evidence to indicate that grade retention is more beneficial than grade promotion for students with strong academic or adjustment difficulties. This conclusion should not be interpreted to mean promotion is better than retention but that accumulated research evidence is so poor that valid inferences can not be drawn concerning the relative benefits of these options".

Holmes and Matthews (1984) using meta-analysis integrated the results of 44 controlled studies. The consensus was that nonpromtion had a uniformly negative effect. Children who were retained scored lower than the

promoted group by about one third of a standard deviation. The promoted group was better on academic and social-emotional measures. Holmes continued using the meta-analysis technique in his 1986 research of 17 studies. This time the results were not as uniform - four reports indicated statistically significant results in favor of retention, five indicated in favor of promotion and five reported no significant difference. In 1989, Holmes' meta-analysis indicated that 54 out of 63 controlled studies showed that when retained children went to the next grade they performed more poorly than if they had gone on without retention. Holmes (1984) concluded "that since this cumulative research evidence consistently points to negative effects of nonpromotion, the burden of proof legitimately falls on proponents of retention plans to show there is compelling logic indicating success of their plans where so many other plans have failed."

Shepard & Smith (1987) assessed the effect of retention on first grade achievement and adjustment. The study was done in a Colorado school district where schools within the district differed in the percentage of retained students. Eighty children were matched on socioeconomic and achievement levels and compared at the end of first grade. There were no differences between the retained and control group on teacher ratings of reading and math achievement. The groups did not significantly differ on the California Test of Basic Skills reading or math scores. Shepard & Smith

found these results to be consistent with existing studies on the effects of two year kindergarten programs.

Niklason (1984) studied 102 children in two Utah school districts, where retention effects were measured using the Wide Range Achievement Test. It was found that the 62 promoted children made significantly more progress than the 40 retained children. Since retention did not seem to benefit a majority of students, Niklason (1987) sought to discover if it is effective for a certain minority of subjects. Using the subjects in her previous study, Niklason grouped the children according to four categories - retained vs. promoted, remediation vs. no remediation, ability (high vs. low), and grade level (K-1 or 2-6). Her findings indicated that promoted children made more progress the following year than those who had been retained. Retention did not benefit younger children, children receiving supplementary instruction, or children with average or above intelligence. Additional research with varied populations is necessary to attempt to provide the basis for educational policy.

Characteristics of children who would benefit from retention were identified by Sandoval & Hughes (1981). One hundred forty six students identified by their teachers as candidates for retention were tested using a variety of instruments to measure intellectual functioning, cognitive and physical development, academic achievement, perceptual motor ability and inter-personal relationships. Results

showed three areas that made retention more successful for a student. They are academic skills (esp. reading), emotional development and social skills. Children who were successful emerged from the repeated year in the top third of their class.

Retention in kindergarten has taken many forms - delayed entry, junior kindergarten, or transitional classes. Eads (1990) studied the effect these methods have on achievement. A negative effect has been associated with transitional programs and kindergarten retention. Little difference between retention and alternative programs were found. Transitional classes were designed to prevent failure that may occur when a kindergartener is not ready for first grade. Gredler (1984) found that the at risk but promoted children were no different at the end of first grade from the children who participated in the extra year program. Johnson, Merrell, & Stover (1990) studied the effects of kindergarten retention on academic achievement of fourth graders. The use of early grade retention was not effective as an academic intervention. They conclude that their findings may be limited due to the number of subjects.

Butler & Handley's (1990) research arrived at a different conclusion regarding the benefits of retention at the early childhood level. Forty eight retained kindergarten and thirty retained first graders were compared to thirty nine first graders who were socially promoted at the wishes of their parents. Repeaters in kindergarten did

significantly better than a similar group who were socially promoted.

Since the 1930's social scientists have been concerned about the effect retention has on a child's social and emotional growth. Research findings indicate that children with strong self concepts tend to achieve better in school. Does this high self concept promote achievement or does the success in school produce higher self concept ? (Butler & Handley, 1990). Goodlad (1954) found less damage to a child's social relation with peers among first grade retainees than for those retained in later grades. Current retention practices reflect these beliefs since the highest rate of retention is found in first grade (Rose, Medway, Cantrell & Marus, (1983). Finlayson (1977) believes that the only valid way to explore the effect retention has on a child's self concept is to study children before they fail and follow their self concept development after nonpromotion. All first graders were included in his initial sample. In the second year, children were separated into groups of nonpromoted, borderline and promoted. Since 25 children had been retained, he randomly selected 25 students from each remaining group. Self concepts were measured a total of four separate times using the FACES scale. The results showed that retention did not negatively affect the self concept of the primary grade pupil. Butler & Handley, (1990) concurs with Finlayson's findings and agrees that the

impact of grade retention can not be measured unless the self concept of the child is examined prior to retention.

All researchers do not agree about the effects of retention on self concept. Holmes' (1989) synthesis of research indicates that retention does not have a positive effect upon the social adjustment of the child. Students have poorer social adjustment, lower self concepts and more negative attitudes toward school. Bell (1972) considered self concept in the transitional classroom. He found children to be lower in self esteem and self confidence than at risk children who did not repeat. During an interview survey, 87% of the children said that being retained made them feel sad, upset or embarrassed (Byrnes, 1989). Sandoval & Fitzgerald (1985) administered a questionnaire to high school students regarding retention. Children retained in elementary school answered favorably, but the same attitude was not observed if the child was retained in high school. Kaoru Yamamoto (1980) reports retention to be as stressful to a child as going blind or losing a parent.

According to Shepard & Smith (1989), a meta-analysis of 63 studies indicated that students who are retained are far more likely to drop out of school than students with similar performance that have been promoted. Grissom & Shepherd (1989) proved through their structural equation model that retention definitely affects the drop out rate in high and low socioeconomic groups. Children who repeated were 20% to 30% more likely to drop out of school. The drop out

syndrome, according to Rice (1989) begins early in a child's education. In his study, done in Chicago a connection to reading skills, retention and drop out rates were made. During a drop out interview study done in Cincinnati, it was found that 80% of drop outs surveyed had repeated a grade in schools (Gostright, 1989). Children retained in grades 9 - 12 had a greater risk of dropping out than children retained in elementary school. Public opinion surveyed in a recent Gallup Poll, regarding the connection between the drop out rate and retention was that students not meeting academic standards would drop out of school anyway (Elam, 1990).

An important factor when a child is retained is parental support and cooperation (Curry, 1982). A three year study by the Austin Independent School district (1985) found that the students who benefitted most from retention had strong parental support for the decision. Medway, (1985) who supported the benefit of retention in the early grades, reported that students are most likely to succeed the second year in a grade if the parents accepted the decision and worked with their children. In 1988, Soto sought to obtain perceptions and practices of parents whose children have been retained in kindergarten. Also to discover parental perceptions of the child's reaction to the experience. Only ten families responded so we are cautioned about drawing strong conclusions. Most parents felt that the teachers had their child's best interest in mind and felt the decision would have positive effects for the child especially with

socialization. Parents agreed with the decision but reported that they felt angry, embarrassed or overwhelmed. Their family lives were affected with the decision of retention and their child experienced stress as the result.

Parents who feel retention has helped one of their children are likely to push for retention if another child is having difficulty in school (Finlayson, 1975). In a parent interview Finlayson (1977) reported that their child liked school more, were more confident and suffered no social stigma. These parents found retention to be successful and would make the same decision again. Byrnes & Yamamoto (1984) stated that the majority of parents and educators believe that grade repetition is an effective solution for academic failure and social immaturity.

Which is best for our school children - social promotion or retention? Proponents of social promotion believe that the threat or experience of failure is an ineffective motivator. Instead, pupils are motivated by success. This arguement is supported by reinforcement principles that demonstrate the principle that reward not punishment increase future behavior (Rose, Medway, & Marus, 1983). In opposition, Ebel (1980) reminds us of the negative reinforcement principle which tells us students work in order to avoid negative consequences. Schools, which eliminate the threat and stigma associated with failure, remove an incentive for work.

The Gesell Institute of Human Development (1980) proposed a developmental placement program where a child is started in school and promoted according to his development age as determined by the Gesell Screening Test. They believe 50% of school problems could by remediated or alleviated with this method. May & Welch (1984) determined if retention based on the Gesell development placement does affect children's school performance. They selected 223 children representing all Grade 2-6 enrolled in the same school from kindergarten. Although retained children were chronologically older, they did not perform as well on standardized tests as the promoted group.

With so many studies reporting inconclusive evidence of benefits to students being retained, why do so many educators choose to retain such a large percentage of students? One reason maybe a lack of a satisfactory alternative. Educational professionals should look at other interventions to both retention and social promotion. Eads (1990) proposes that the money saved from retention and transitional classes might be better spent on redesigning curriculum, reducing class size and increasing quality pre-school programs. Remedial education, summer school, before and after school programs, instructional aides to work with target children in the regular room and peer tutoring are more effective than retention. (Johnson, Merrell, & Stover, 1990). The Center for Policy Research in Education (1990) has reported that creative teachers have

found alternatives for retention. They developed staffing teams to work out a plan with the next grade teacher about how to address the needs of students who would have been a retention candidate. This would be similar to an IEP now utilized in special education.

Kindergarten curriculum has escalated in recent years. According to Shepard & Smith (1989), "more academics does not make better learning. Schools with appropriate curriculums make retention unnecessary." Poorly achieving students need a more inspired and challenging curriculum, that involves them in meaningful problems rather than drill (Center for Policy Research in Education, 1990).

The research regarding the benefits of retention to students is inconclusive. Neither approach, retention or social promotion appear to be the solution to this problem. Many other alternatives have been discussed to better serve our school children. "Public demand for competency based education provide educators with a very challenging dilemma to resolve" (Butler & Handley, 1990).

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Appendices

Appendix A

Percentile scores of promoted sample on CTBS Reading

Student	Score	Student	Score
1	79	48	9
2	40	49	50
3	70	50	73
4	60	51	60
5	90	52	43
6	77	53	23
7	73	54	63
8	48	55	26
9	73	56	47
10	84	57	19
11	95	58	30
12	58	59	34
13	28	60	40
14	61	61	77
15	71	62	34
16	50	63	14
17	44	64	73
18	70	65	90
19	14	66	41
20	70	67	68
21	73	68	91
22	77	69	83
23	51	70	77
24	63	71	57
25	70	72	27
26	47	73	20
27	51	74	59
28	45	75	54
29	77	76	95
30	40	77	50
31	15	78	50
32	18	79	95
33	91	80	61
34	55	81	66
35	63	82	44
36	73	83	33
37	73	84	61
38	84	85	42
39	79	86	66
40	63	87	65
41	64	88	69
42	61	89	61
43	70	90	90
44	63	91	55
45	16	92	37
46	28	93	77
47	30	94	73

Appendix B

Percentile scores of retained sample on CTBS Reading

Student	Score
1	19
2	43
3	40
4	60
5	25
6	3
7	50
8	63
9	60
10	53
11	81
12	84
13	52
14	41
15	83
16	49
17	19
18	71
19	83
20	73
21	57
22	55
23	95